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The Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety
R1-109, Parliament House
PO Box 6021, Canberra ACT 2600

AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT'S JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON CYBER-SAFETY

Dear Secretary,

On behalf of P&C Council, I would like to provide this submission to the Australian Parliament's Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety issues affecting children and young people.

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations is the peak body representing Parents' and Citizens' Associations (P&Cs) in government primary schools, high schools and secondary colleges in the ACT.

It is a representative organisation whose objectives are to foster a quality public education system, to provide support services for affiliates, and to make representations to the government on behalf of parents/carers in government schools. It plays a particularly important role in promoting parent participation in schools and the system as a whole.

Council's submission to this inquiry is based on Council's policy, consultations with P&C Associations and discussions from focus groups with parents of students at an ACT government school.

The attachment to this covering letter sets out the points we would like to put forward in line with the terms of reference for the Inquiry. Council has a number of recommendations for the Inquiry to consider that we believe will help better protect young people online. Council's submission has been developed in response to parent's concerns. Given the nature of this Inquiry and the importance it holds for parents, Council strongly advises the Inquiry to consider Council's recommendations.

Please contact me on (02) 6241 5759 or 0420 302 017 if you have any questions about this submission.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Singer
President
ACT Council of Parents' and Citizens' Associations

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON CYBER-SAFETY

ACT COUNCIL OF P&C ASSOCIATIONS SUBMISSION

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Summary

Council believes that increasing online safety for young people is best approached through creating strong collaborative partnerships between parents, schools and the government that educates young people and parents about safe online behaviour and use. It is important to educate children from an early age on how to be a safe and informed internet user so that they can carry these skills later in life. At the same time, it is critical that we do not get caught up in a discourse of fear over use of the internet by children.

Council believes it is most productive for the Committee to assess how best to increase the usefulness of resources already implemented and educate children and parents in the most effective manner to increase the safety of Australia's children online.

It is recommended that further measures be used to better educate and assist parents in protecting their child online. Parents have indicated to Council that they often struggle to keep up to date with new technology and current trends of internet use by young people and are therefore limited in their ability to effectively protect their child from potential online threats.

It is also advised that the government introduces effective advertising directed towards parents and children to help curb the incidence of cyber-bullying and harm to children online. Council has found that parents are aware of resources provided by the government but are not always certain where to go to access the information when it is needed.

Council also recommends that use of the internet be taught in schools and collaborated with the curriculum from the first year of schooling, making it something that children grow up with and as common place as other educational initiatives such as stranger danger.

Overall, Council would like to see the Government adopt a firm strategic stance to pressure websites that are popular with children to introduce sufficient privacy and safety protocols. Council recognises that the government has limited power in patrolling the internet and

therefore it should take a moral stance against offending websites rather than fund an online ombudsman.

Schools, parents and the government need to work together in order to help protect children online. Better collaboration between schools, parents and the government should be developed to teach young Australians how to best protect themselves from online threats and minimise risk and provide schools and parents with better access to resources and greater awareness of what to do and where to go when in need.

Introduction

Council welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Select Committee on cyber-safety. P&C Council is aware of the concerns many parents have in how to best protect their child online without overly restricting access. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the concerns of parents that Council represents and we support measures that will better develop collaborative approaches between schools, parents and the government to improve cyber-safety for children.

The P&C Council is aware of the significant measures that the government has recently introduced in an attempt to improve cyber-safety. We are supportive of the latest initiatives that have been implemented, including the launch of *Cybersmart* by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA 2010), the introduction of the Cybersafety Outreach Professional Development for Educators program and establishing the Consultative Working Group and Youth Advisory Group. The government has shown that it is treating cyber-safety concerns seriously and Council is pleased with these new initiatives.

The internet is an essential tool for all Australians, including children. It provides an opportunity to access important resources and information and provides significant education, social and entertainment benefits (DBCDE 2010). Schools are also increasingly integrating the use of the internet into the school curriculum. While there are many benefits for young people accessing the internet, being online can also potentially expose children to harmful risks.

It is encouraging to see the Government is continually investigating cyber-safety issues affecting children and young people and it is hoped that a strong collaborative partnership between schools, parents and the government will be used to facilitate measures to improve cyber-safety for young people.

Use of the Internet by Young People

While parents generally believe they are responsible for protecting their child/ren online, many parents feel they are unsuccessful in their attempts. Parents often feel defenseless in protecting their child using technology or internet sites that they themselves are unfamiliar with. Children are going online very young and are using the internet intuitively.

Statistics show that more young adults and children use the internet than their parents. In 2006-07 76.5 per cent of 15-24 year olds used the internet, while only 72.6 percent of 35-44 and 66.5 percent 45-54 year olds stated that they used the internet, with even further decreases among Australians 55+ (ABS 2007).

Not only do parents not use the internet as much as young people, but they use the internet differently. In 2010, 74 percent of ACT children said they used the internet to play online games, 39 percent of children downloaded audio visual content as opposed to the national average of 29 percent (ABS 2010). Social networking sites (SNS) were also rated highly by teenagers, with 48 percent of 12-14 year olds using SNS (ABS 2010). Findings stated in an ACMA research report published in July 2009 found that most parents felt that they only held a basic knowledge of SNS and could merely provide trivial advice (ACMA 2009, p. 58).

ABS statistics found that most parents were taking steps to protect their child/ren online. 88 percent of ACT families educated their child/ren about safe and appropriate use of the internet, 58 percent of parents had installed content filters while 93 percent said they supervised and monitored their child/ren's use of the internet (ABS 2010).

However, parents have indicated to Council that they feel they lack the ability to successfully control their child's online behaviour and activity and believe that their efforts are mostly ineffective. As growing numbers of young people own a mobile phone, children can use the internet and "sms" anywhere and at anytime. While parents are taking steps to protect their children, comments from parents to Council show that they feel their efforts were mostly

ineffective and were unsure of further measures to introduce that would further protect their child online.

Council suggests that further measures be used to better educate and assist parents in protecting their child online. It is recommended that parents be provided with easy to understand user guides on sites that are popular among children. For example, parents should be provided access to a user guide on how to change your child's privacy settings on Facebook, how to make a complaint about inappropriate or offensive material on sites such as Facebook or suggestions of appropriate sites that are safe for children to stream video content, as well as other important tips and advice about safe sites and use of a variety of internet sites that are popular among children. This will assist parents with making informed decisions about sites and content that they are not familiar with and to better control their child's activity online.

In addition, as technology is constantly changing and parents are not always up to date with the current trends of internet use by young people or are limited in their knowledge of new technology, Council recommends that an annual information/update session, funded by the government, is provided for parents and is conducted in schools by trained experts. Such a session will provide parents with key points and helpful hints on new technology advancements and how to use new technology appropriately and safely.

Parents Perception of Risks for Children Online and Access to Resources

In a focus group conducted by Council in June 2010, many concerns were raised about the potential threat of cyber-bullying, identity theft, downloading a virus and the risks involved with accessing SNS or chat forums and the potential for their child to talk to someone who is different to who they say they are. Parents seemed to be less concerned about the potential for their child to access sites that encouraged illegal or harmful behaviour or accessing inappropriate material. Interestingly, the most common issue reported by children who used the internet was accessing inappropriate material (ABS 2010).

The ACMA report found that parents often did not talk to their children about online safety because they were either unaware of risks, unfamiliar with the internet or did not see the risks as relevant to their child (ACMA 2009, p. 58). The report found that:

Parents tend to re-enforce the basic internet safety messages with a stronger focus on the issue of predators rather than the broader range of safety issues. Both schools and parents currently appear to work in isolation in informing children about cybersafety, although parents did show interest in a more collaborative approach with schools (ACMA 2009, p. 10).

Council's discussions with parents have also indicated parents would appreciate working more collaboratively with schools. Parents feel they are responsible for protecting their child online and children are most likely to access the internet at home than at school, making it important that parents stay involved in their child's use of the internet (ABS 2010). Council strongly supports measures that will encourage greater collaboration between schools and parents to best educate parents on how to protect their child online.

Council recognises that there is not a shortfall of information for parents and schools on how to protect young people online. However, parents have suggested to Council that while they are aware that there are resources provided by the government, they are not always certain where to go to access the information when it is needed. Council advises the government advertises the ACMA website better to parents as well as other resources and their potential use. It is recommended that television and/or radio advertisement is used, as well as advertising through schools. Council suggests that an appropriate safety song and/or slogan be used, especially when targeting young children.

In order to further raise awareness about the potential for harm to young people online, it is suggested that student suicide rates be published as a national statistic to raise parent's

awareness of the issue and provide a “wake up call” for action. These statistics should be published as a national average.

In addition, Council suggests that the government and schools encourage interested, suitably qualified parents to assist with computer education and that schools promote parental home support that compliments what is taught at schools, by providing parents with information about the objective and strategy for integrating computers into the curriculum.

Internet Filtering

Council is aware of the Government’s proposal to make Internet Service Providers (ISP) responsible for mandatory filtering of refused classification (RC) sites. While this may be one solution to protect children from inappropriate online material, given the unique concerns associated with mandatory filtering and the separate Inquiry being conducted by the Department of Broadband, Communication and the Digital Economy on measures to increase accountability and transparency for refused classification material, Council feels it would be of no real value for this inquiry to focus on mandatory filtering as a solution for increasing cyber-safety for young people. Rather, the committee should focus its attention on providing further suggestions on how to improve the information and resources that are already available to parents and schools.

In terms of the filters already made available for parents by the Government. ACMA research indicates that parent’s perception of web-filtering is mixed (ACMA 2009). With some parents finding them useful, while others finding the extent to which they blocked harmless sites, often accessed by children for educational purposes, meant the filters became a nuisance (ACMA 2009). Council is pleased the Government has provided access to web filtering products to parents and while we are aware of the shortfalls of these products, it has provided some parents with greater control of their child’s online activity. However, it should be noted that filters do not protect children from cyber-bullying, viruses and privacy theft and is therefore

important to further establish measures for parents and schools to protect children from these harms.

Encouraging Young People to be Concerned about Online-Safety

Many young people see the advantages of using the internet as outweighing the risks that are involved. The NSW Commission for Children and Young People has found that students were generally opposed to filtering and tended to focus on the benefits of using social networking sites (NSW Legislative Council 2009). Research by the ACMA (2010) indicates that children receive an excessive amount of information about protection from online threats, however many children do not pay necessary attention to this advice as they often think they already know the dangers or that they would never be affected by anything personally.

Council has a few suggestions that may improve the effectiveness of education about online threats for young people. It is advised that use of the internet be taught in schools and collaborated with the curriculum from the first year of schooling, making it something that children grow up with and as common place as other educational initiatives such as stranger danger.

Council also recommends the government introduces effective advertisement that increases awareness among children of online risks. Parents have advised Council that they would like to see advertising used in a similar fashion as the current drink responsibly and speeding ads on television. In addition, schools and the government should use case studies to effectively illustrate what can happen if a young person does not effectively protect themselves online.

The Responsibility of Schools in protecting children online

Council advocates for computers to be integrated with all appropriate courses in the school's curriculum and that education on using computers goes hand in hand with education about using the internet. It is becoming common practice for schools to require use of the internet for

education purposes such as student research and in doing so schools have the responsibility to ensure children are being kept safe online. Schools need to treat acts of cyber-bullying with the seriousness that it deserves. Council would like to draw the Inquiries attention to the recommendations made by the NSW Coroner, MacPherson into the inquiry of Alex Wildman's suicide as a result of bullying and cyber-bullying (MacPherson 2010).

It is Council's Policy that "all children have the right to education within a setting which is free from tension, aggravations or violence or the threat of these. Council supports the development of student welfare policies within each school which cover aspects such as bullying...and encompasses behaviour management." (P&C Council 2009, p. 87). Rosalie O'Neale, Senior Advisor with the ACMA has said that often teenagers do not talk to their parents if something does go wrong online, partially because they are afraid that they may lose access to the internet all together (Howard 2009). Therefore it is important that young people are aware of someone at school, whether it is a teacher, councilor or older students, who they are encouraged to turn to if in need.

It is also recommended that better working relationships be developed between schools and parents by encouraging and assisting schools to offer events such as P&C information evenings on cyber-safety. Resources should be made available to schools once a year for briefings to parents on Cyber-Safety. Council also proposes that schools appoint a teacher who is made known to parents and can best assist if there are questions or concerns from parents about cyber-safety and that these measures should be seen as part of the Department of Educations' student safety programs.

Council also advises schools to increase awareness for both parents and students of alternative social networking sites that protect children's privacy such as Club Penguin, Ekidna World and Superclubs Plus. Promotion at schools can increase the number of students using these sites and provide a safer online social networking environment for children.

Additional Measures by the Government

In order to better assist schools and parents to protect young people online, Council would like to see the Government adopt a firm strategic stance to pressure websites that are popular with children to introduce sufficient privacy measures that increases the online safety of minors and ensure websites respond appropriately to reports of abuse.

In respect to the proposal of an online ombudsman, Council is unconvinced that such a position would have any meaningful power. Unless a site is Australian registered, an online ombudsman will have no power to enforce control over online material or proceed with any further action. Illegal content on Australian sites can already be raised with the ACMA. But, in terms of offensive material, it is difficult to see how an ombudsman could have any power to control what is posted on websites, particularly if hosted overseas.

It seems more productive for the government to urge the owners of websites to introduce additional safety measures to protect children. For example, while only the page creators on facebook can delete a post made by a member of a group, the government should pressure sites like facebook to automatically hide comments by users if there are a number of “dislikes”. The government has limited power in relation to patrolling the internet and therefore it should take a moral stance rather than using funds to establish an online ombudsman whose role will be mostly ineffective.

Council also recommends that the government follow a similar action as the USA in pressuring SNS to delete known sex offenders registered in Australia. In February 2009, MySpace deleted 90,000 profiles of sex offenders registered in the USA which was made possible as part of an agreement between the website and state attorneys general. It is recommended that the Australian Government introduce a similar agreement with popular social-networking sites to restrict access for known sex offenders in Australia.

It is also paramount that the government stays on top of any advancements of technology and the different means by which children can access the internet. Already, children have the

potential to access the internet on their mobile phone and iPod and it can only be certain that this list will continue to grow. The government should legislate for mobile phone providers to make it explicit for parents when signing new mobile phone contracts or allowing access to the iTunes store on a child's iPod that their child will have access to the internet on these devices. Parents have indicated to Council that at times they have been unaware that their child was provided access to the internet on their mobile phone or iPod. While they may have signed a contract with service providers, the provision of internet was not made explicit. Council recommends that the government legislates that providers have an explicit, opt-in system, rather than opt-out for providing the internet on mobile phones for children 18 years or younger and that internet access for minors on mobile phones and iPods only be allowed with parental approval.

Conclusion

Cyber-safety is everyone's responsibility; parents, schools and the government. The best filter to reduce incidence of harm online is education. Better collaboration between schools, parents and the government should be developed to teach young Australians how to best protect themselves from online threats and minimise risk. Better working relationships need to be built between schools and parents, providing schools and parents greater resources and awareness of what to do and where to go when in need.

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